

Hopes, Dreams, and Destiny as One: Prologue-chp 6

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Summary: A fusion of all three Breath of Fire games, detectives Kale Sabbaeth and Bow Linewalker find themselves at the beginning of a quest...

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Alright, I know this is odd. But I got the idea while I was sleeping. So, here it is, a Breath of Fire story remix.....

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HOPES, DREAMS, AND DESTINY AS ONE

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by Gregg Landsman

Prologue:

Twin Stars

He watches over the events on the world, the one that His daughters watch over. But, as all things family, such a simple task could not go as it was supposed to.

He is known by many Names, many voices, and many forms.

Standing here, in His sanctuary, staring into the orb at his feet, in

the Body of a middle-aged human male, he is known as The Master.

The teacher to Ladon.

Father to the Goddess and the Sorceress.

And right now, very, very confused.

He doesn't even look up as the woman appears behind Him.

A young, gold-haired woman. Striking image of His daughter, and Hers.

"I was expecting you.", he says.

"You should have been. Our children are fighting, again.", she responds, folding her arms.

"Unfortunately, yes. They can never let things remain simple."

"Why can't they simply let bygones be bygones?", the woman asks, pacing, "They are sisters!"

"They are sisters.", He responds, sitting down, a stool appearing underneath Him, "That should answer your question."

She turns to Him, boring into Him with Her gaze.

"Considering you are their father, I should not be surprised at their behavior."

"You wound me, my dear.", He responds, wryly smiling, "Nonetheless, these problems will be solved, all too soon."

"Why? Is it stirring?", She asks, quickly turning to Him, aghast.

"Not yet. But soon.", He responds, and gestures for Her to come over, "Now, come. I think this, you would want to see."

She walks over, sitting next to Him, as the image forms, into a rainy little town.....

Chapter 1:

Three-sided Equation

It was raining in Hometown.

That was the only thing on Kale Sabbaeth's mind as he looked out the window.

It was raining. And like the weather, he was miserable, to.

He turns from the window, the low light reflecting off his azure hair, to his sparsely-decorated office, and walks to the ill-furnished desk.

The door opens, his partner walking in.

He's about two inches taller than Kale, covered in black, brown, and white fur, his face canine in it's shape, like a bipedal st. bernard.

"What is it, Bow?", Kale asks.

"We've got someone who wants to see us.", Bow responds, "New case."

"Alright. Send him in."

"_Her_, Buddy.", Bow responds, and turns to outside the office, "Alright, ma'am. We'll see you, now."

The first thing Kale notices is the wings. Smooth, elegant, and with black feathers. He's equally impressed by the rest of her, however.

Tall, elegant, beautiful. Golden-blond hair, running down her back and to her waist, dressed in an ankle-length, concealing black dress.

He catches her green, diamond-like eyes, and sees something in them. Sadness, grief, burden. He doesn't know why.....but might have something to do with why she's come here.

"Please," he says, gesturing to the chair in front of his desk, "Sit down, Mrs-"

"Miss," she responds, "Nina Wyndia. Are you Mr. Sabbaeth?"

"Yes, I am. Please, tell us what you need."

Bow closes the door behind her, walking over to beside Kale as Kale sits down in the desk's chair.

"I need to hire your services.", she says, "There has been a kidnapping."

"Who?"

"It was my sister.", she responds, her hands visible shaking, folded on her lap, "It was to be a message, for me."

"Do you know who kidnapped her?", Bow asks.

"It was the Joker gang.", she responds.

Kale can feel his heart skip a beat. The Joker gang was among the more ruthless in existence. They were also led by a lunatic with a habit of very violent practical jokes.

"What do the Jokers want with you?", he asks.

"Recruitment.", she responds, "They want my services."

"You mean...-"

"No!", she responds, flustered, her chiseled face beet-red, "No, not that. I'm a graduate from the local magic school....and they think I could provide services as a resident mage."

"Have you agreed to their demands?"

"Yes. I would meet with them tomorrow to have my sister freed....and to begin my service to them.", she responds, "I am willing to pay your full fees if you would help me."

"With what?", Bow asks.

"To pull off a rescue.", she responds, "I understand that you are trained fighters. I need your help to free my sister, and destroy the Jokers for good."

Not too ambitious....

"If you'll excuse us.", Kale says, getting up, grabbing Bow by the shoulder, "We'll be back in a minute. We need to consult."

He pulls Bow out.

"I don't like it, Buddy. I think she's hiding something.", Bow says, folding his arms.

Kale shakes his head, peering in through a window in their side-office, seeing her shaking in the chair, hands clasped together.

"She's scared and nervous.", he says, "She needs our help. She may be hiding something, but I think she told us everything we need to know."

"You've got the hots for her."

Kale gives his partner a sharp look, tapping on the doorframe.

"I'm a professional, Bow.", he responds, "I'm for this. You?"

"She wouldn't have hired us if she couldn't afford us, Buddy.", Bow responds, "Might as well."

Kale smiles, slightly, and walks out, Bow following.

"Ms. Wyndia?", Kale asks, walking through the doorway, Nina turning.

"Yes?", she asks.

"We'll do it.", he responds, "Just lead us to the hideout, tomorrow, and we'll take things from there."

She smiles, standing up.

"Thank you, Mr. Sabbaeth.", she responds, "I cannot thank you enough."

"It's alright. You can pay us when this job is over.", he responds, extending his hand, hers gripping his in a delicate handshake, "Good

day."

She nods, and walks out.

Kale turns to Bow, scratching the back of his neck.

"Looks like we're going to have to get to the armory.", he responds, "Didn't you just tune up your crossbow?"

"Yup. Added three more yards in range.", Bow responds, "Hope your gear's in good shape. We've got a workout coming up."

He pats Kale on the back, and walks out.

".....'Well, I don't know,' said the goat, 'But the one in the middle was definitely a shape-changer!'"

Kale tries to not listen to the drunkards at the bar as he picks at the salad he ordered, reading over some equipment notes in the local pub.

He's still trying to get his mind off Nina.

Never felt this way about a woman....

Hell, never had time for women, whatsoever.

Guess you could say a couple of women messed up his life to begin with:

His mother and his sister. Both apparently dead.

He shakes off the thoughts, looking over the description of a new type of body armor.

"Mr. Sabbaeth?"

He looks up at the familiar voice, seeing Nina standing right in front of him.

"Ms. Wyndia. What can I do for you?", he asks.

"I want to thank you for your help.", she says, and gestures to the seat across from him, "May I?"

"Of course.", he responds.

She sits down, her wings folding into her shoulders.

Never knew she could do that.

"This really does mean a lot to me.", she says, "I imagine Mina must be very scared, right now."

"Mina is....your sister?"

She nods.

"My younger sister. We were raised separately, but we have been close.", she responds, "She's not even seventeen, yet."

He considers asking her age, but he was raised a gentlemen....whatever raising he did, anyway.

"If she's the leverage they have on you, I don't think she's hurt.", he responds, "But we won't take any risks. Bow and I will get her out as soon as we can."

"You will do the job yourselves?", she asks, her voice showing a hint of anxiety.

"Bow and I have Ranger training. We can defend ourselves. I use a sword, he uses a crossbow.", he responds, "He also knows a few healing spells."

"Not many, I can gather."

"Mages are hard to hire.", he responds, "Most either train for their lives or go to the Urkan Tapa because they think it's a 'gift from God.' I think it's just fate trying to annoy me."

She chuckles, slightly, standing up.

"I had best go, now.", she says.

"I'll escort you out.", he responds, "Just to be careful."

She smiles, warmly, wrapping her arm around his, and they walk out, Kale groaning as the drunkards start butchering a song.

Kale flexes his hands as he feels the metal-cloth mesh stretching.

"You sure this is my size?", he asks, "It feels a little tight."

He's standing in a small warehouse, dressed in a form fitting black-cloth body suit, padded around the hips, shins, gloves, shoulders, chest, abdomen, and back, a black leather belt with an array of pouches around his waist.

"Might've been too long at the cleaners.", Bow says, in a less form-fitting suit, with a white-and-brown overcoat over his armor, his crossbow slung over his shoulder, "Don't worry. It'll stretch."

"Don't want to get stabbed because my crotch was too tight.", Kale responds, shrugging on his own coat.

They hear a woman coughing.

Nina is standing in the doorway, arms folded, dressed in a blue, ankle-length dress.

"If you two are done discussing crotch sizes," she states, "Can we go?"

Kale grabs his scabbard, clasp ing it over his shoulder and sliding a jewel-hilted sword in.

Bow follows him out, as Nina leads the way out of town.

"How far to the hideout?", Kale asks.

"Five miles. It's an abandoned sub-house.", she responds, "I'll go in first. You two will have to find another way."

"No problem.", Bow responds, "I think I know a few ways."

"Good.", she responds, absently stretching out her wings, "Let us hope this goes well."

"We're professionals.", Kale responds, clenching his fist again, the fabric stretching to conform, "We know what we're doing."

And all the way there, he can't get Nina off his mind....

Chapter 2:

Everybody Loves a Clown

Kale doesn't like being called a detective.

Tracker is more the word. Bounty Hunter makes him and Bow look seedy, and that drives away business.

Actually, Active Detective is exactly what he's looking for.

Track down the people you're after, and then turn them in, as actively as you can. You have full police authority, as well as the full confidence of your employer.

As Nina walks through the entrance, escorted by two members of the Joker Gang, he begins to wonder if he's earned it.

Nina shrugs off one Joker's hand from her arm, walking with them through the tunnels and passageways of the lair.

She can feel her anger welling up, swearing that if her sister's been harmed, all Hell will break loose.

They lead her into a large chamber, with a second level overlooking.

She sees Mina standing at one stairwell, a guard behind her.

A spotlight shines from behind her, illuminating the stage in front of them.

From one of the passageways, someone walks through.

Dressed in a dark-blue and violet three-piece suit, his hair wild and colored green, his face chalk white, a ghastly grin on his face.

He is somewhat overweight, with a slight paunch, and not exactly in shape, either.

He's carrying a cane, sauntering onto the 'stage' like a veteran

performer, twirling about the cane as he begins laughing.

A chilling, ghastly laugh. An insane laugh.

A clown. A Joker, to be exact.

"Welcome, welcome, girls and boys.", he says, in a showman's voice, "In case you didn't know, I am the Joker, at your service. And you must be Nina."

"Yes. Now let Mina go.", she responds.

"Not just yet, little Nina dear.", the Joker says, his face now an exaggerated frown, "We have your contract to hammer out. If you're going to serve me for life, we have some clauses to work out, you know. Now, let's get to business."

The door to the lair creaks open, a pebble rolling through.

The two sentries at the door watch the pebble.

One turns, when a crossbow bolt, with a needle attached, flies through, embedding in his shoulder.

He cries out as his eyes roll up, and he falls, asleep, to the floor.

The other turns, as a black clad fist slams into his face, turning about as he falls to the floor, unconscious.

Kale stands there, testing the hand.

"Remind me to buy more stuff from that armorer.", he says, "This is pretty high-quality."

Bow walks through, cocking another bolt.

"Yeah, yeah. Accounting later.", he responds, "We've got us a clown to catch and a woman to rescue."

"Great. Clowns.", Kale responds, following Bow through, "I hate clowns."

"Who doesn't?", Bow responds, and leads him down the passages.

"Now, Nina dear, you are going to serve me and my boys as our new mage.", the Joker says, propped up on his cane, "Our old one didn't do so well."

"You fired him?"

"Yes. Phosphorous bomb.", the Joker responds, "Wasn't very funny. Real downer, actually."

"What?"

"Can you tell a joke?", he asks, "If you can, and a good one, at that, we can get down to contract negotiations."

Kale and Bow sprint through the passages, a string of maimed or

unconscious guards littering their path.

Bow cocks another bolt, firing it, a wall of smoke filling the room as the guards draw their knives.

Kale leaps into the air, landing his booted foot into one's face, drawing his sword and slashing along the second's mid section.

The smoke clears as Bow and Kale run up the stairs, seeing the passageway.

"Must be the second level.", Kale whispers, "She said it was two level."

Bow nods, cocking another tranquilizer bolt, and leads Kale through.

Kale sees Nina, between two sets of guards, reciting to the Joker a joke he heard from the drunkards, last night.

".....'Well, I don't know,' said the goat, 'But the one in the middle was definitely a shape-changer!'", Nina finishes.

She hears a couple of chuckles from the guards, but the Joker stands there, straightfaced.

He walks down the stairs over to Nina.

"And why," he asks, "Was that funny?"

She opens her mouth to explain, when he backhands her, sharply.

"Wrong!", he states, his face contorted to anger, "You don't explain the joke! If you explain it, it's ****not funny!**** My jokes are models of their simplicity! You hear them, you get them, you laugh! End of joke! Try again!"

Nina calms herself, a trickle of blood coming from her mouth, as she sees something moving along the top section of the chamber.

Kale nearly reaches for the crossbow to plug Joker himself, but tries to calm himself, his hand absently reaching for his sword.

Bow tries to aim for the guard behind the dark-haired windian standing nearby, his hands shaking slightly.

"Damn damn damn.", he growls.

He looks under the gun, seeing the aiming mechanism shaking, throwing off his equilibrium.

"Son of a...."

He uncocks the bolt, gripping the bolt in his own hands as he strides down the stairs, quickly walking to the guard, and jamming the needle into the side of his neck before he can turn.

He collapses to the ground, as Bow puts a hand over Mina's mouth, who suddenly squawks in surprise.

"We're the good guys.", Bow says, cutting Mina's rope bonds, as Kale sprints down the stairs.

He draws his sword, catching Nina's eye.

He nods, smirking slightly.

"Try AGAIN!", Joker orders.

Nina grins, slightly, tensing herself.

"Alright," she says, "What's tall, ugly, and screams ****real**** loud when set on fire?"

He raises an eyebrow, smiling slightly.

"What?", he asks.

He hears someone whistling.

He turns, seeing Kale and Bow, with the freed Mina, waving at him.

She turns back to Nina, who's eyes are glowing white.

"_You._"

A pulse of wind knocks away the guards, as a ball of fire forms in front of her.

He backs away, tripping up slightly on the stairs.

The blast lances out, igniting him, and sending him, screaming, into the wall, collapsing the rock onto him.

Kale and Bow both watch, jaws open.

"Wow.", Kale says, "Where'd she learn _that?_"

"Nina," Mina says, smiling, "Was top of her class at the Magic Academy. Attack magic was her specialty."

The other guards regain their senses, drawing their swords.

Bow jams in a crossbow bolt, Kale readying his blade.

"Well," Kale says, "Time to earn our commission. On three, Bow."

Nina launches herself in the air with a thrust of her wings, her hands glowing.

"_Three!_"", Kale and Bow both shout.

Bow pulls the trigger, three bolts launching out, catching three guards in the chest, all of them falling to the ground as Kale launches himself in the air, planting his foot in one guard's stomach.

He lands on his feet as the guard falls back into the others, slashing another one as Bow cocks another array of arrows.

Kale ducks, the spray going over his head and into the remaining guards, hearing them gasp and groan as they fall to the ground, unconscious or dead.

"Well, that worked.", Kale says, climbing to his feet as Nina lands in front of him.

Mina quickly barrels down the stairs, the two sisters embracing, for a moment.

"Are you alright?", Nina asks.

"I'm fine.", Mina responds, "Who are-"

"Some very good people I hired.", she responds, "Are you ready to go?"

"Not a moment too soon, sister-"

They hear a laugh.

A chilling, wretched, insane laugh.

The pile of rocks bursts open, a seven foot tall, ragged-looking demon standing there, its jaw locked in a permanent smile.

"_You know,_" he says, "_That wasn't really all that funny._"

Nina tenses, folding her wings back.

"Mina!", she yells, "Run!"

"But-"

"That wasn't a suggestion, Mina!", Nina yells, "Run! Now!"

Mina backs away, and runs out.

"Everyone's a critic.", Bow grumbles, cocking an arrow and shooting it.

The arrow grazes the Joker's left arm, enveloping him in a cloud of smoke.

Nina begins casting a spell, as Kale watches the Joker lumber out of the cloud.

One of the Joker's arms stretches out, towards Nina, Kale quickly stepping in and slicing it off in mid motion, tentacles rising up from around them.

"This is bad.", he says, slashing at the appendages as they rise up, "Bow?!"

Bow grumbles, cocking an arrow.

"Right up!", he yells, leaping over a tentacle, and fires.

The bulb-tipped arrow flies out, striking the Joker.

It explodes in a burst of flame, the tentacles dying away as the Joker screams.

"Phosphorous arrow.", Bow says, "Zombies are suckers for it."

Nina nods, dissipating her spell.

"_Eh eh ehhehhhehheh heh heh heh..._", the cackling voice says, "_Not yet, ladies and gentlemen._"

The giant lumbers out of the flames, burned and blackened, his nails stretching to talons.

"Know any lightning spells?", Kale asks.

Nina nods, silently.

Kale leaps forward, dodging slashes and darts from Joker, and leaps up, planting his sword into the Joker's shoulder.

The Joker swings at him, tossing him aside.

"Nina, NOW!"

She takes a deep breath, and screams out a non-decipherable word.

A bolt of lightning strikes from her hands, catching the hilt of the sword.

Lightning streams through the Joker's body, making him scream and cry in agony and horror.

The electricity runs its course, through him and into the ground, as he collapses to the floor, the sword falling out.

The side of his head slams against the ground, green blood pouring out.

He begins laughing, slowly, steadily, going into full-out hysteria....and stops, his eyes clouding up, and fades into ash.

Kale lets loose a breath as he sits up, climbing to his feet.

Bow helps him up, seeing the ash that was the Joker.

"Wow.", Bow says, "Not bad."

"I was hoping that would work.", Kale responds, "If it didn't, we'd be screwed."

Nina clears her throat, getting their attention.

"It seems to me," she says, "That you are in woefully need of a magic user."

Kale looks to Bow, and then back to Nina.

"Gotta warn you.", he says, walking over, "Hours are long, we don't have much help, and all jobs we do personally. Your pay would be one third of the commission, minus expenses, same as me and Bow. Still interested?"

"I'm a magic graduate with no interest in joining a convent or traveling to the Urkan Tapa. I am."

Kale reaches out, and takes her hand into a soft handshake.

"Welcome aboard," he says, "Partner."

Bow turns in the last screws on the new, gold-plated plaque.

It reads:

Sabbaeth, Bow, and Wyndia:

Active Private Investigators.

He turns to Nina, who's now dressed in a black, three-piece business dress suit, and Mina, who's been cleaned up and groomed, her white-wings hanging lazily from her shoulders.

"Well," he says, "What's first for today?"

"Home would be good.", Mina states.

Nina chuckles, giving her a sideways glance.

The floor begins to shake.

Bow looks down the hallway, his nose twitching.

"We've got company.", he says, as the doors to the stairwell open.

They simply stare as the figure....now, multitude of figures, most in armor, one in elegant and elaborate robes, walk through.

The one on the robes walks up to them.

He's six and a half feet tall, his face feline in appearance, his robes barely concealing the pure brute power underneath, a tail straightly jutting from his back.

"I am Khasra nar Kiranka, Grand Prince of the Woren.", he says, his voice feline and rumbling, "I have a job for you."

Chapter 3:

Cat in a Coliseum

All in all, Kale's day has been going pretty well.

Nina is now officially a partner with him and Bow, and she paid the charge for their services. Even without a job, beforehand, she's

pretty loaded. Doesn't know from where, though.

They got their commissions, Mina is ready to return to Windia, and it looks like they have a new job lined up.

Unfortunately, that job is being offered to them by a very angry woren.

It's easy to tell when a woren is angry.

The claws spontaneously retract and extract. The whiskers bristle uncontrollably.

And there's a look in the eyes that tells you he wants to kill somebody.

"How can we help you?", Kale asks, plastering on a smile.

Khasra turns to him, snarling.

"I need to....purchase....your services.", Khasra growls, saying 'purchase' like it was a profanity.

"Alright..", Kale says, affording a glance to his partners, "The four of us will discuss it in the office, then-"

"No!", Khasra roars, visibly shaking the room, "With _you!_ Not your pet or lair mate! Just you!"

"Sir, they are my partners, not assistants.", Kale responds, "If you want to negotiate, it will have to be with all of us."

Khasra bores into them with his gaze, and strides past them, into the office.

"Charming fellow.", Nina says, under her breath.

"High-paying fellow, to.", Bow says, and walks through the door.

Kale turns to the eight woren soldiers waiting in the lobby.

"Um.....stay.", he says, and walks into the office, after Nina.

Nina sits in the desk's chair, as Bow stands by the side of the desk, and Khasra stands in the middle of the room.

Kale closes the door behind him, as he walks over to the desk, leaning on it.

"So, your highness, what can I do for you?", he asks.

Khasra turns his back to them hands clenching.

"My eldest daughter," he growls, "Has been kidnapped."

Kale nods, tapping his fingers on the desk.

"You mean Katrinka?", Nina asks.

Kale gives her a questioning glance.

She nods to him, as Khasra turns to them.

"Yes. My daughter and heir.", he responds, "She has been spotted in Corsair. Fighting at the Arena. I have contact on the inside, but he can do nothing."

"What do you want us to do?", Bow asks.

"I want," Khasra responds, claws digging into the desk, "For you to find her, and bring her ****_out of there!_**** Before I take action, personally."

Kale looks at the deep gashes in his desk.

Khasra is pissed off. He can tell that much.

"Alright.", Kale says, "We can do that. What's your contact's name?"

"I am not at liberty to say.", Khasra responds, "You have three days."

He pulls his claws from the desk, retracting them, and storms out.

The three turn to each other, Bow scratching under his ear.

"Wow.", he says, "This is gonna be good. He wants us to storm the Arena?"

"No....I've got a better plan.", Kale responds.

"Whatever the plan, Corsair is on the way back from Windia.", Nina interjects, "We can stop there after we drop Mina off."

They both stare at Nina.

"She's been kidnapped once, already!", she responds, "As well, she is also on my back to go home. Do you want her complaining all throughout this job?"

"She's got a point.", Kale says, "No need to have a kid along with us."

Bow nods, groaning.

"Alright, alright.", he says, "Guess I'm making travel arrangements?"

"Yeah, Bow.", Kale responds, "I need to get Nina fitted for some armor and a weapon."

Bow nods, groaning, and walks out of the office.

"He enjoys that part.", Kale says, "Lets him hit on stewardesses."

"What is your plan, anyway?", she asks, as he begins looking through the file cabinet by the window.

He goes through the middle draw, pulling out a file, opening it and checking something.

"There.", he says, putting it in the bag by the desk, "All set. Now, we have to get you fitted."

"Those suits had better provide some protection.", she says, standing up, "If this is just a way for you to leer at me--"

"Please, Nina, I'm a gentleman.", he responds, in mock horror, "Besides, my plan for getting you out of your clothes is much more elaborate."

They stare at each other, for a moment, before she finally shakes her head, chuckling slightly.

"Alright, alright.", she says, "But you had better have gotten my size."

"Size one, right?"

She smacks him lightly on the back of the head, walking out, Kale following with a smug smile on his face, closing the door behind him.

Bow looks over the tickets he just bought, and over the reservations he just made.

Unfortunately, the Contest of Champions has begun, and will be in the elimination rounds by the time they get there.

So, that means he could only get two rooms. One for him, one for Kale and Nina.

Hope they don't mind.

He checks his watch, and heads back to the office.

"The entire thing is a metal-fibre mesh.", Kale says, as he hands Nina the box, "It works kind of like a full suit of armor, but a lot less bulky and a lot easier to conceal."

The two are in a large room, littered with crates and boxes, various scabbards and weapons on the walls.

She feels the fabric in her hands, rubbing it between her fingers.

"It's as thin as cloth.", she says.

"Yeah. But watch.", he says, and takes a crossbow off the wall.

He takes the armor, hanging it between two of the boxes, and steps back, jamming a bolt into the crossbow.

He pulls the trigger, the bolt flying out.....and bouncing off the armor.

"That is impressive.", she says, walking over, seeing the crushed bolt, and picks up the armor.

"You'll feel physical impact, but it won't cut through. The bolt would have given you a bruise. Nothing else.", he responds.

She looks around, and turns back to him.

"There's some high boxes in front of you. You can change behind them. I need to get some weapons from storage.", he says, pointing over to the wall.

She walks behind one of the boxes, shrugging off the jacket and hanging it over, as she examines the suit, and finds the zipper in the back.

She unzips the armor, putting it aside, as she pries off her shoes, hearing Kale rumaging through various closets.

She can hear him pick something up, walking back over, as she begins to unbutton her blouse.

He picks up the silver-hilted rapier, putting it in a thin, light scabbard, and puts it under his arm, walking back to where Nina was.

He sees her jacket on one of the high boxes, and sees the tips of her wings disappearing beneath the horizon of the crates.

"How do you do that?", he asks.

"Do what?", she responds, her voice relaying her struggle to get into the bodysuit.

"Well....hide your wings?"

"Muscle contraction, I think.", she responds, "How do you-"

"The fabric stretches.", he says, "There's a small attachment to the zipper. Lets you pull it up easier."

He hears the sound of the suit zipping up, leaning against a box.

"Well?", he asks.

"It fits.", she says, "Not too tight, actually."

"I said I wasn't-"

"Alright, alright. I believe you.", she says.

"You're going to have to come out eventually, Nina.", he says, tapping his finger.

He hears her sigh in exasperation, fumbling around with something.

She walks out. The armor is near form-fitting, azure blue, some

looseness around her busom, the thighs, and the back, the armor conforming to her arms, legs and waist. She has her hands on her hips, staring him down with a look that stands between questioning and incredulity.

"It looks good.", he says, "It does."

"It's not skin tight.", she says, "I was expecting..."

"It's supposed to be functional.", he responds, "This isn't a modeling agency. I told you before, I'm not a pervert. It's supposed to be a little loose, so you can move in it. Although, you won't have to."

"Why not?"

"You're not a physical fighter.", he responds, walking over.

"That is the most sexist-"

"Hear me out.", he interrupts, "You're an attack magic-user. You rely on your spells because it's nearly impossible to exhaust your magic reserves in a normal or drawn out fight. You know several high-level spells, can cast them very quickly, and use them in a systematic way to take down opponents in droves. You don't have a need for physical combat."

"You're right. How do you know that?", she asks, visibly impressed.

He walks over to her, to her back, looking over something.

He sees a pair of creases by her shoulders, and tugs on them.

"There.", he says, "Had this one specialty made."

She closes her eyes, and lets loose a ragged breath.

Her wings burst out from her shoulders, through the creases, extending to their full length.

"Thank you.", she says, "I felt like I was bound, that way."

"Well, as for your other question," he says, "I have trained, considerably. You tend to pick up things, after a while. I'm a physical fighter, short range, traditional. That's why I'm going ahead with Plan A, and you and Bow will do Plan B."

"Which are?"

"Plan A," he says, "Is how I get inside the Arena, to find out where Katrinka is. I enter the Contest of Champions. Find out who was responsible, and what happens to Katrinka. Khasra would want that information. I also find out who Khasra's contact is."

"And Plan B?"

"You and Bow, while everyone else is busy, find Khasra's man inside, and rescue Katrinka. If everything goes well, we get it done before

Khasra can take things into his own hands.", Kale responds, "Woren are not known for mercy or tolerance."

"I know. I've met a couple.", she responds, "When do we leave?"

"As soon as Bow gets back.", he responds, "Oh, yeah."

He walks over to the crate he was standing at, and picks up the rapier.

"And in case you actually have to resort to physical combat, here.", he says, and hands her the weapon, "It's a silver-coated rapier. Perfect for undead and all around bad guys."

She draws the weapon, slashing it about effortlessly. She slashes in a figure eight, and then an effortless lunge, slicing straight through the rope bindings on one box, the crate opening and white pellets streaming out.

He stares at the pellets, and then Nina, who's assumed a flawless fencing stance.

"At my magic school," she says, "I was taught how to swordfight."

The door opens, Bow walking through.

He stops, staring at Nina, and then giving a hearty thumbs-up to Kale.

She shoots a look at Kale, who raises his hands, defensively.

He turns back to Bow, walking over to him.

"Well?", he asks.

"Well, I got everything you wanted done.", he says, "Got us our tickets. Mina's bags are packed, and the ride leaves in an hour and a half. Packed up our armor, your sword, my crossbow, which I got fixed, and some extra supplies if we need them. I packed some clothes for four days, in case this thing goes over. I packed your suit, my suit, and, Nina, I think I packed your good dress. The blue one with the arm straps?"

"Yes, that's the one.", she responds, "How long is the trip?"

"An hour to get to Windia, another thirty minutes to Corsair.", Bow responds, "That's pretty much everything. I got your bag, Kale, and the folder inside. I locked the place up before I left."

"Great, Bow.", Kale responds, "Well, that's that. Let's get a move on. We'll meet you by the station."

"Got it, Buddy.", Bow says, slapping Kale on the back, "You two have fun, ya'hear?"

He walks out, as Nina gives Kale a stern look.

"Hey, hey, I didn't-", he stammers out.

"You had better not have cameras where I was changing.", she warns.

"No way to fit them there.", he responds, "Besides, you didn't take off your underwear."

She turns to him, face red.

"How did you-", she starts, when he backs away, hands up defensively.

"I could see the indents in the suit!", he quickly responds, "Really!"

She stands there, for a moment, and chuckles, slightly.

"Alright.", she says, "I believe you. Is Bow always like that?"

"Tries to set me up whenever he can.", he responds, "I'll wait for you here while you change."

She nods, smiling slightly, and walks behind the high crates.

Chapter 4:

And You thought Your Family was
Disfunctional

Mina is sleeping, her head leaned against the window as the landscape passes by, the engine of the train humming softly.

Kale is sitting across from her, reading over some flyers on Corsair and the Arena.

Apparently, the Arena has had some shady business dealings in the past.

Especially with the Syn City syndicates.

"Well, that explains a lot.", he mutters.

Also has suspected ties with....

The Joker Gang.

The Seliat Pirates, out by Simaforte.

And the Cult of Sivar, a warlike Woren sect.

Kale scratches his head, as he hears a light cooing.

He turns, seeing Nina wrapped up into a ball, sleeping in the corner.

He looks up at the air vent, and shakes his head.

He stands up, climbing up on the seat, and pops it open, looking inside.

He grips the sides, pulling his head up into it, seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

The train screeches as it begins to slow down, and stops, jarring his feet off the couch, and careening him to the floor with a yelp.

The first thing he sees as his vision clears is Nina, standing over him, his ears still ringing so he can't hear what she's saying.

But he thinks she's demanding to know what the hell he was just doing.

"Ah....sorry.", he says, "Thought there was something in the air vents..."

"I was tired.", she says, "I didn't sleep well, last night. Remind me never to fall asleep near you, again."

She pulls him up, helping him back into the seat, as the door to the cabin opens, and Bow walks in.

He sees the grate on the floor, and Kale with a lump on his head.

"What happened?", he asks.

"Nothing I want to talk about.", Kale responds, "Windia's the next stop?"

"Yep.", Bow says, "Train has a half hour layover there. So, you could drop off Mina, put in a word with your folks, and get back here before the train leaves with our bags."

"Great!", Mina responds, stretching out her pearl-white wings, "Well, how much longer 'til we get there?"

"Ten minutes, I guess.", Kale responds, as the train begins moving, again, reaching into his bag under the seat and taking out a small vial.

He feels the lump on his forehead, wincing slightly and almost considering swearing when he sees Mina watching him, intently.

"Bottoms up.", he says, popping the cork in the vial, and downs it, grimacing at the bitter taste as the bump fades back into his skin.

"What_ did_ happen?", Bow asks.

"Really, Bow, I don't want to talk about it."

"Kale thought we were being poisoned, climbed into the air duct," Nina says, sitting back, folding her arms, "And then the train stopped."

Kale gives her a withering look.

She looks back at him, smiling slightly.

"That_ is_ what happened, isn't it?", she asks, "I was asleep at the time."

Kale looks to her, then to Mina, who's barely concealing her amusement, to Bow, who's trying not to laugh.

He walks past Bow.

"Have to use the bathroom.", he says, weakly, "Call me when we get there."

He walks out, as the three of them begin laughing.

As they step off the train, the first thing Kale notices is that Nina's folded back her wings.

"You three go on without me.", she says, "I....I'll wait here."

She hugs Mina, patting her on the back.

"Tell Mother I said hi.", she says, releasing from her younger sister, as she walks away from them.

"What was that about?", Kale asks, as he, Mina, and Bow begin walking into the town.

"Oh, she and Mom had a disagreement a while back.", she responds, "Neither one wants to admit the other's wrong. I think they both are."

"What sort of disagreement?", he asks.

"Oh, family stuff.", Mina responds, as she leads them up the stairs, to the castle.

Something begins to overshadow them as they begin the second flight of three stairs.

Kale and Bow look up, to see the massive spires and monolithic towers of Castle Wyndia, one of the true landmarks of the continent.

"Your mother works in the castle?", Bow asks.

"Yeah.", Mina responds, as she climb the last flight of marble-colored stairs.

The guard at the door sees Mina, his eyes going wide, and hurries into the door.

The door opens again, a moment later, and the Queen of Windia, an elegant, middle aged woman with greying blonde hair, is standing there.

Mina hurries up the stairs, smiling widely, as the Queen grabs her, and pulls her into a crushing hug.

"Mina, what happened?!", she demands, holding Mina at arm's length,

"I heard you had been _kidnapped!_ Your father and I were worried sick!"

"It's alright, Mom.", Mina responds, as Bow and Kale look at each other, and then at the two women, "It's alright."

"_Who_ kidnapped you?", the Queen says, slowly, "Are you hurt?"

"No. No, Mom, really, I'm alright.", Mina responds, "I'll tell you and Dad everything later. But these two saved me, along with.....I mean, they saved me."

The Queen turns to Bow and Kale, who slowly walk up the last few stairs.

"Um....your Majesty.", Kale says, bowing deeply, giving a withering look to Mina, which she barely notices.

"You have the deepest gratitude of our kingdom," the Queen says, "Mr....."

"Sabbaeth. Kale Sabbaeth.", Kale responds, "And this is my partner, Bow Linewalker."

"Your Highness.", Bow says, bowing.

"Very well. Mr. Sabbaeth, Mr. Bow, you have the deepest thanks of the Kingdom of Windia.", she says, "If there is anything you ever have need of, simply ask for it."

She turns, to urge Mina inside the castle.

"Um....your Majesty?", Kale asks.

The Queen turns.

"A small question.", Kale continues, "Well.....we wanted to know about any taboos or anything like that....well, since Mina's sister is a partner in our firm, are there any problems with royalty working with-"

"No, not that I know of.", the Queen responds, "But that is moot. Mina has no sister. I am sorry, but we cannot allow foreigners inside the castle. I hope you understand. Good day, Mr. Sabbaeth. Mr. Bow."

She turns, and walks in, the gate closing, the guard reassuming his position.

Kale and Bow look at each other, scratching their heads, as they walk down the stairs.

"What was that...?", Kale asks, "Mina doesn't have a sister..?"

"Don't know. Must be the inbreeding.", Bow responds, "Look, we've got the good side of royalty, and we can ask Nina on the train. I've got to see what the armory's got, arrow wise. Meet you back there in ten minutes."

"Yeah. Yeah, meet ya then.", Kale says, as Bow walks off.

"Nina is a princess?", Kale asks himself, under his breath, and begins walking back to the train station, mulling over his thoughts.

The Thieve's Tomb, in the middle of a fading desert.

Three guardsmen stand aside as another man, dressed in yellow leather armor, a small sword in scabbard around his waist, walks by.

He takes off his helmet, revealing dark brown hair underneath and chiseled, haggard features.

"Well?", he asks, turning to the guards.

They begin to follow him.

"The intruder was first detected at the rooftop entrance, Ser Karn.", the lead guard says, "We do not know how she got there, and no one saw her on the ground. She may have had alternate transportation. She's been mowing through our guards throughout the entire structure, and we believe she may be near the main vault."

Karn mutters something under his breath, drawing his sword, and opens up a hatch at his feet.

"Alright, then.", he says, "If the thief wants a fight, we give it to her. Follow me!"

He drops down the hatch, as do the others.

One of the armored guards ducks as the small, black leather-covered fist smashes through the wall, reducing the concrete and stone to powder.

He swings his short sword at the intruder, the weapon deflected effortlessly, the intruder's motions leaving fading shadows of her arms and legs, as she knees him in the stomach, and brings her elbow down on his head, knocking him unconscious and on the floor.

"Sleep well, and dream of gentler women.", she says, her voice conveying the pleasure she's taking from this job, as she sprints out, into the shadows.

Karn clicks on the lights in the room, illuminating the multiple catwalks and pores in the wall.

He can see his intruder, standing on the main catwalk.

Dressed in a skin-tight, padded leather body suit, with dark blue hair, and....vents, near her shoulders.

She turns as soon as the lights flash on, seeing Karn and the three guards.

"Alright, that's enough.", Karn states, "Surrender, right now, and I'll consider not having you killed for this."

"You'll have to come and get me, first.", she responds, crouching

down in an almost catlike stance.

Karn stomps his foot on a button on the floor, the various pores groaning, arrows and spears shooting out from the walls to her left and right.

Her body blurs, leaving shadow images of herself as she leaps over and under every spear, catching many and tossing them at Karn's feet.

"Get her!", Karn orders, pointing his sword to her, backing away.

The three guards draw their broadswords, yelling as they rush at her.

She smiles, grimly, falling back into a fighting stance.

She lunges forward, a single swipe of her hand sending the first guard flying across the room, to the wall in back of Karn. A second, upward strike sends a guard up in the air, and to the ground beneath them, unconscious.

The third guard swings his sword at her, hitting only air as she leaps out of the way, onto the edge of the catwalk.

She jumps off it, time slowing as she hangs in the air in front of him.

As quickly as the distortion starts, it ends, the thief slamming her foot into the guard's chest, pushing him off the catwalk, and to the ground below.

She turns to Karn, who's standing there, frozen in shock, as she races to the vault door at the end of the room.

The vault opens with a groan, the thief walking in.

She looks around, and smiles.

Gold, platinum, and jewels are piled as high as the eye can see, reaching the ceiling of the massive room.

"Now this," she says, "I could get used to."

She strides into the room, taking out a pouch from a padded part of her waist.

Suddenly, Karn charges in, tackling her.

As they go down, she presses her hands against the floor, flipping them both up and landing on his back, hearing him cry out as his grip loosens.

She flips herself around on one hand, straddling him and grasping his throat with her right hand, flipping out her other hand and flexing it, a set of five six inch claws appearing from her fingertips, which then retract.

"Now," she says, pressing the tips of her right hand's fingers

against his throat, "Want to place bets whether or not I have claws on my right hand?"

He can feel the creases in the leather.

Feel the metal waiting underneath.

He swallows down his dry throat, as sweat begins to bead on his forehead.

She smiles, slightly, stepping off him as she walks over to one of the piles, filling the pouch with blue gemstones.

"Do you," Karn gasps, "Have _any_ idea what you've done?!"

"Yes.", she responds, "I stole from thieves. Technically, that makes me right."

"You're good. You could join us.", he says.

"I'm not a union girl.", she says, "No way."

He reaches for his sword, lying on the ground, near him.

She bends down, pulling his collar up, forcibly kissing him for a second, and then slams his head to the floor, knocking him out.

His hand goes limp, an inch from the sword.

She takes another gem from a pile, sliding it through her fingers.

"Here," she says, tossing it onto the unconscious Karn, "Buy yourself something nice."

She strides out of the vault, and disappears into the shadows.

Chapter 5:

Victory to the Warrior Who Runs the
Least

Nina has been quiet.

Once Kale saw the look on her face when they boarded the train, he decided not to ask her about Mina and the Queen.

She hasn't spoken for the entire train ride.

She looked....haunted. Distraught. Mina said something happened between Nina and her parents..

He guessed she might have been adopted, or Mina was her half-sister....but he had suspicions, nonetheless.

"This's our stop!", Bow announces, breaking Kale's train of thought.

Kale gets up, grabbing his bag as the attendants grab their luggage from the car's closet.

Nina quietly gets up, after him, taking her purse and bag as the train stops.

Kale looks out the window, seeing the massive Arena, its ebon pyramid structure overshadowing the rest of Corsair.

"Damn.", he whispers, under his breath, as they walk off.

"Well, I got us the last two rooms at the hotel. It's right near the Arena, so it's pretty convenient.", Bow says, "I got myself a single, so you two will have to share the double."

"Fine by us.", Nina says, as they walk through the surrounding town, "Should we check in now?"

"Makes sense.", Kale responds, "No need to haul our luggage for the next few hours. Which hotel?"

"That one.", Bow responds, pointing ahead of them.

Kale and Nina look up. They whistle, quietly.

Its about fifteen floors high, ending in a pyramid-shaped penthouse apartment at the top.

Every inch of it screams with extravagance.

"Bow," Kale says, "Where did you get the money to pay for this?"

"I called in a favor with Khasra's chief of guard."

"What type?", Nina asks.

"A little thing in his past.", Bow responds, "One that involved him running from battle, screaming like a girl. Sort of thing that the woren look down upon."

He hefts up his suitcase, walking to the doors.

"Bow," Nina says, quickly following him, "That's blackmail."

"Nah.", he responds, shaking his head, "We call it entrapment."

He opens the door, walking through, Kale quickly lifting his bags and following them in.

Bow walks to the reception desk in the hotel, where a perpetually cheerful young woman is sitting.

"Hi," she says, "Welcome to the Victor's Tower. How can I help you?"

"Reservation for two rooms.", Bow responds, "Under the name Nerenni."

The receptionist looks through the book in front of her, and looks

up, smiling.

"Your rooms are ready, Mr. Nerenni.", she says, "The bellhop will take your bags."

A large, fur covered bipedal ox in a bellhop uniform walks over, tipping his hat to them as he picks up all the bags with one hand.

"Follow me.", he says, walking to the stairs, the three quickly following.

He walks up three flights of stairs, opening the door to a massive hallway.

"Your single room is on this floor, number 304.", he says, leading them to the end of the hallway, and opening the door with the key, "Who takes this room?"

"I do.", Bow says.

The ox hands him the key, placing his bags in the room.

"I thought so.", the ox says.

Bow turns to Kale and Nina, standing in the doorway.

"I'm going to catch some shut-eye. Come by when you two are ready to go to the Arena."

He shuts the door, locking it.

"Well then, follow me.", the ox says, leading them back to the stairs, "I figured you two."

He leads them up eleven flights of stairs, Nina occasionally lifting herself up a few steps with her wings, Kale struggling the last few flights to keep up, pulling himself up by the rail.

"Doesn't," he gasps, "This place....have an elevator?"

"It does. You never asked to use it.", the ox responds, opening the door as they reach the fourteenth floor, "Your room is on floor fifteen."

Kale gives the ox a withering look, which he doesn't see, as he leads them into the hallway.

He leads them to the end of the hall, where an unmarked door waits.

"This is your room.", he says, opening the door with a specially engraved key, "The honeymoon suite."

He pushes open the door.

The entire room is covered in flowers, wine and fruit baskets and various.....aides. Kale and Nina look around the room, in a combination of stark horror and bemused fascination. A massive, triple sized bed is in the center of the room.

"The bed has already been made, if you need to use it.", the ox says, placing their bags on the floor, "And we've already soundproofed the walls. Still, don't make too much noise. Have a nice day."

He turns, closing the door.

"Wait, we're not-", Kale says, quickly turning. The bellhop is already gone.

"....Married.", he finishes.

Nina simply looks around in a combination of amusement and disgust.

"Actually...it's really not that bad."

He turns to her, as she walks over to the bed.

"I mean, the paint could be a bit less...."

"Pastels?", he asks, gesturing to the bright pink and blue walls.

"Well, that.", she says, "But it's actually quite nice. And very big. Remind me to have Bow blackma....sorry. Entrap more people."

She sits on the bed, patting it with her hands.

"It's not like the bed is that small.", she says, "We won't..."

"No, we won't.", Kale responds, "Don't worry. I wear more sleeping then I do when I'm awake."

He sees the two slots on either side of the bed.

Coin slots.

He reaches into his pocket, taking out a small, silver coin, and slides it in.

The bed begins humming.

Nina squarks as she feels something press against her seat, quickly standing up.

Various, blunt protrusions are writhing out of the mattress, under the sheets and comforter, like thousands of little tentacles gasping for fresh prey.

"Magic fingers.", Kale says, "This place is tackier than I thought."

She shrugs off her jacket, carefully reaching out with her hand, making sure the small creatures don't bite back.

She carefully, slowly climbs onto the bed, lying back, spreading her wings out on it.

At that moment, he hears something he never thought he'd here from

the windian woman.

A sigh of pure, sybaritic contentment.

"Can't be all bad.", he says, scratching his head.

"Oh....it's wonderful!", she responds, "Please tell me they have a change machine in this room....."

"I honestly thought you had some sort of taste.", he says.

"Oh, get on here!", she says, "It's incredible!"

He shrugs off his jacket, climbing on and laying back.

He doesn't even summon up the will to complain.

"Wow...", he gasps, as the little buggers begin jabbing against his spine.

Well...., he thinks, between rushes of pure pleasure, _Maybe she's right...._

--

Kale waits in a large, highly decorated lobby as Nina taps her fingers on the armrest next to him.

Bow, no doubt, is still napping. But he wanted to get this done with as soon as possible.

The receptionist looks up, motioning to Kale.

He stands up, taking the folder out of his bag, and walks over, handing it to her.

He stands there as she looks over the folder, the contents, and the recordings inside.

"Well, very impressive, Mr...."

"Bateson. Ryu Bateson.", he says, smiling slightly as he recites the assumed name.

"Very impressive, Mr. Bateson. Due to your vast experience, you're qualified to enter the elimination rounds.", she says, "Congratulations."

She hands him back the folder, as he takes it, smiling.

"Thank you.", he says, "When should I arrive for my matches?"

"You have three matches, tomorrow, starting at 10:45, in the null-magic arena.", she says, "Have a nice day."

"You to.", he says, walking away, and nodding to Nina.

She gets up, walking with him out the door and to the stairwell.

"Well?", she asks.

"Going perfectly.", he says, "I'm in the elimination rounds. While most of the crowd is there, you and Bow are Plan B."

They walk down the stairs, as he drops the folder into his bag, closing it and tossing it over his shoulder.

They walk out into the ground floor lobby, Kale's eyes wandering over to the forearms of every man they pass by.

They walk out the doors, into the streets of Corsair, the Arena adjacent to the building they were in.

"Woren contacts or employees," he says, "Always have a clan marking on their right forearm. That's how you'll know who Khasra's contact is. No woren or anyone who works for a woren would allow himself to work in a place as dishonorable as the Arena. Only if it was a part of something else."

"Such as bringing down the Arena."

"Must have been Khasra's plan altogether. Katrinka's kidnapping just gave him a reason.", Kale responds, as they walk back to the hotel.

A pair of glowing blue eyes watches them, from the rooftops.

Kale turns the key to the door, opening it.....and finds someone on the couch.

"Bow!", he says, walking in, Nina following, "How did you-"

"Reservations are in my name, Buddy.", Bow responds, standing up, "Assumed name, anyways. While you were registering, I got blueprints."

He takes a rolled up paper from his jacket, tossing it to Kale.

"Tells us where the 'housing' for their fighters is, how to get there, that sort.", he says, "I'll get some dinner ready. We'll plan it out later."

He walks into the kitchen of the suite, as Kale sits down on the sofa, rolling out the paper, revealing several cross sections of the towering Arena.

Nina sits down next to him, looking over the paper.

"How did get that?", she asks.

"Probably stole it.", Kale responds, "Bow's a master thief."

Kale looks over the diagrams, feeling her gaze.

"He doesn't steal, anymore. I mean, illegal stealing, breaking and entering, that sort.", he says, "He used to, but he's turned legit."

"How long ago?"

"Took a while.", Kale says, "That's how I first met him. He broke into a place I was staying at."

"When?"

"I was.....about seven.", he says, "Something really strange happened.....well, I was staying at the place where I used to live, when Bow broke in through the window, looking for whatever he could find. I decided that I couldn't live there, anymore, and I went off with him. That was fourteen years ago."

"Have you ever helped him steal?", she asks, leveling a measuring gaze at him.

"When I had to.", he responds, "But it was my idea to go legit, and he went along with it. Although, first couple of months of Ranger training were awkward. Had to convince him that the pins and training clothes didn't have resale value."

Kale looks over the diagram, tracing the path from a particular spot, to another.

"Well, the null-magic hall's above seven floors up from the housing....but the Hall of Kings is one floor up."

"It's the main event.", she says, "They would want everyone there."

"So you wouldn't be noticed sneaking out.", Kale responds, "Although, not sure about the number of guards at the housing....."

Three guards stand at attendance in front of the cells in the Arena.

The door opens.

A pair of glowing blue eyes level at them.

The rest of the body overshadows them.

"Leave.", the voice rumbles, like thunder overhead and around them.

The guards quickly nod, walking out.

He walks to one of the cells, eying the worn female inside.

"Katrinka nar Kiranka.", he says.

The worn stirrs, seeing the figure there, and the eyes centering on her.

"Yes, Champion of Champions?", she asks, sitting up.

"Daughter of Khasra nar Kiranka and Jhira nar Craixos, correct?", he asks, in a perfect worn accent.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"Listen carefully.", he says, "Kr'cho nil verechott t'vosch'tto."

At first, she says nothing, wondering how he learned her native tongue.

"T'naos?", she asks.

"T'naos.", he responds, "One quarter eights of days."

The eyes disappear, as he walks away from the cell.

Thankfully, the suite has two bathrooms.

Kale notes that as he brushes his teeth, washing up.

Bow left about half an hour ago, having already worked out a plan for tomorrow.

Kale will work his way through the elimination rounds.

If he can get into the final round, all the better.

If not...improvise.

He finishes buttoning up the blue pajama shirt, checking the matching pants, as he walks out.

Nina is already in the bedroom, in a strapped, ankle length black nightgown.

Saying nothing, he climbs into bed, on the left side, as she climbs into the bed on the right side.

She rolls onto her stomach, pulling up the comforter, draping her wings over herself.

"Promise," she says, "That you won't climb into an air duct when I fall asleep?"

He can hear the sarcasm in her voice, as well as the slight amusement.

".....very funny.", he responds, "Good night, Nina."

"Good night, Kale."

He pulls over the covers, lying back, and falls asleep.

Chapter 6:

Difference Between Victory and
Bludgeoning

The seven year old, blue haired boy waves the torch around, illuminating the cave, the dog-boy next to him quickly shaking to get

the water out of his fur.

"Don't wave it around.", the dog-boy says, "You don't want to wake up every bat here, do you?"

"Sorry, Bow.", the boy says, as Bow leads him through the cave.

"This route'll get us out near a port town.", Bow says, "From there, we can go just about anywhere we want. I hear Simaforte is ripe for the picking, nowadays."

A noise rumbles through the cave.

"...what was that?", Bow asks, waving around his own torch.

He leads Bow down a narrow passage, to an open chamber near the entrance.

Something zips right past them.

Like a tail.....

Bow trails the light along the floor, up the walls, and to the back wall....where something is waiting.

Something big.

Thirty feet tall, covered in scales so dark, they almost blend in with the blackness surrounding them.

Three eyes adorn the center of the massive head, a spiked tail thrashing by its side.

The being lifts itself on two massive legs, staring down the two interlopers, sets of claws popping from its hands.

"Holy...", Bow whispers, when the tail lashes out, striking Bow and sending him across the chamber, into the wall.

The demon turns to the boy, who backs away, slowly, eyes wide with terror.

"_Destined One...._", the being rumbles, crossing the distance with two steps.

The boy backs up against the wall, as the demon lowers its head, staring at him face-to-face.

"_Destined Child.....I have been waiting for you.....my brethren knew you would come..._"

The tail lashes about, whipping past the boy.

He takes the torch, and stabs at the demon, frantically.

A blast of green fire from its eye swats away the torch, putting it out, the demons eyes illuminating the darkness.

"_Waiting for so long, Last Child._", it rumbles, "_Waiting for you

to open the gates. Remember us. Remember when your destiny comes.
Remember my name when fate is sealed...._"

He can smell the brimstone from the demon's mouth. He can smell the blood of others on its scales.

"_Remember me._", the demon says, almost a whisper,
"_Barubary._"

Kale wakes up, screaming, covered in sweat from the nightmare.

He can still smell the brimstone in his nostrils. Still feel the heat of that....thing's.....gaze.

He jumps when he feels Nina's hand on his arm, seeing her concerned face as she turns on one of the lamps by the bed.

"Kale....Kale, what happened?", she demands.

He tries to speak, but no sounds come out of this throat.

He doesn't remember that ever happening, meeting that thing...does he?

"Kale...."

"I don't know.", he finally says, "It was a nightmare, that's it."

He can tell she's not convinced.

"Really, it's nothing....it just happens.", he responds, "It just happens. Let's go back to sleep."

She stares at him, for a moment, and finally nods.

"Alright.", she says, "Alright. Good night, Kale."

He doesn't say anything as she goes back to sleep, lying back and closing his eyes, again.

Kale slowly slides his sword into the scabbard, testing the leather strap with a swift tug.

He's waiting in a small, somewhat damp stone-walled room, right outside the Null Magic arena.

10:44....

The door opens, a man in a perfectly ironed black suit walking through. He has light brown hair, tied back into a ponytail, and a demeanor about him that makes you want to wash yourself after speaking with him for five minutes.

"Mr. Bateson.", he says, in a deep, resounding voice, "My name is Angus Jacobi, the director of the Arena. I hear you got into the elimination rounds on your credentials alone."

"I did, Mr. Jacobi.", Kale says, standing up.

"Please. Call me Angus.", Angus responds, extending a hand.

Kale carefully grips it in a handshake, never taking his other hand off his sword's hilt.

"Well, just wanted to see the new _wunderchild._", Angus says, smiling widely, "Good luck on your first fight."

He turns, and strides out.

The other door, to the arena opens.

A young woman in....a stewardess's outfit...walks through.

"Hello, Mr. Bateson.", she says, "Your fight will begin in five minutes. The rules of the Null Magic Arena are simple: If you use magic, you will be disqualified. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly.", he responds.

She nods, standing aside.

10:46....

Nina and Bow take their seats at the front row.

"This oughtta be interesting.", Bow says, "He's been in professional fights, but not somethin' on this level."

"Too bad we couldn't help out.", she says.

"Yeah, but it'd blow our cover.", he responds, "Try to spot anyone acting a bit feline or wary. Chances are, that'll be Khasra's man."

The lights begin to dim, spotlights marking the arena floor.

10:49....

"You're on, Mr. Bateson.", the woman says, "Good luck!"

He walks through, hand on the hilt of his sword.

10:50.....

"_Ladies aaaaaand Gentlemen!_", a deep voice echoes, "_Welcome to Battle 2 of the Contest of Champions Elimination Round! Standing in this-a corner, hailing from Rhapala, the kamakazai knight himself, Patrio Bonotaray!_"

The spotlights shine on the northern-most entrance, as the doors open, a six foot tall, gold armored, blonde haired man with a trimmed mustache walking through, holding a dual-edged broadsword in his right hand, the audience wildly cheering.

"_And our newest superstar, a man who got into the elimination rounds on his portfolio alone, hailing from the Southern Continent. Ladies and Gentlemen.....Ryu Bateson!_"

The other doors open, the spotlight shining on Kale as he walks through, the crowd still applauding as his hand reaches for his sword. His hand pulls away from it, as he sums up his opponent with a measured glance.

"_Our winner will go on to face Battle 3's winna for the chance to battle with the Champion of Champions Himself! Good luck to all, your bets have been placed! Lets get ready to rrrrrrummmmmble!_"

Kale instantly sidesteps as Patrio lunges forward, his broadsword embedding itself in the floor, Kale falling to one hand and bringing his foot up into his opponent's solar plexus.

He spins about, planting both hands on the floor as he flips up, both feet slamming into Patrio's face, sending him back as blood flows from his nose and into his mustache.

"Son of", he growls, stumbling backwards.

Kale slowly draws his sword, gripping it steadily in his left hand.

Patrio, eyes red with rage, lunges for him, screaming.

Kale sidesteps, swinging the flatedge of his sword into Patrio's legs, tripping him and sending him, flipping through the air, to the ground, on his back.

Patrio quickly flips up, swinging his sword, locking with Kale's block, the two staring down each other.

He swings again, each stroke of his blade forcing Kale back, the two locking eyes, grinning with equal respect for the other.

"You're good.", Patrio says, in a lightly accented voice.

"So are you. How long have you trained?", Kale asks, as he blocks another blow, stepping out of the way, Patrio's blade scrapping the floor as he raises it to block Kale's attack.

"Fifteen years. Mainly the longsword, but I've grown pretty fond of the broadsword.", Patrio responds, twirling about the blade, Kale stepping back to pull his weapon away.

"Not just because of cutting power?"

"More weight. Gives you more power for attacks.", Patrio says, "Had to train to carry it. Too used to one swipe ending my fights. You seem to be a martial artist, correct?"

Kale grunts as Patrio nearly forces him to one knee.

"Yes.....mainly use it when I can't get my sword out quickly. Ranger training.", he responds, pushing back, against the wall.

Patrio swings, Kale blocking, pushing Kale against the wall.

"So, surrender?", Patrio asks.

"I would....but I have something I need to tell you."

"And that is?"

Kale smiles, slightly.

"I'm not left handed."

He pushes Patrio away, tossing his sword up and catching it in his right hand, swinging it about as he lunges, Patrio just blocking.

The two duel to the cheers of the crowd, Kale leaping up as Patrio swings low, blocking a high blow, swords scraping against each other as they lunge across the distance of the arena.

"So, you prefer the long sword?", Kale asks, their swords letting off sparks as they collide.

"Usually. Lighter weight, faster strokes.", Patrio responds, trying to force Kale's sword to the ground, "Usually compensates for less cutting power."

Kale twirls about his sword, catching Patrio's, and tossing it right out of his hand, to the floor.

Kale straightens the sword, holding it at Patrio's throat, the crowd tensing with anticipation.

Patrio falls to his knees, his brow slicking with perspiration.

"Well?", he asks, "Now what?"

"I'd just as soon break a priceless vase then an artist like you.", Kale says, "But, since I need you unconscious to procede...."

He takes the flatedge of the sword, and whacks him in the side of the head, Patrio grunting as he falls, unconscious, to the ground.

"Please remember, I have the utmost respect for you.", he says, as the crowd cheers.

"_And....wow! Our winna, Ryu Bateson!_", the voice announces, and the crowd goes wild.

Nina lets off a relieved breath, sitting back, much of the crowd standing and applauding.

"You didn't think he'd kill'em, did you?", Bow asks.

"Well...did cross my mind.", Nina says, "He enjoyed that."

"You'd be surprised. He's weird.", Bow responds, "His hobbies can scare me."

Bow sits back, to, as the crowd begins to file out, Kale walking back to his door as some attendants help Patrio to his.

The two stare across to each other, before Patrio gives off an awkward, shaky salute, walking through his door, closing it behind him.

End
file.